

Merritt Parkway, Wilton Road Bridge
(Bridge No. 727)

Spanning Wilton Road (Connecticut State Route 33)
on the Merritt Parkway (Connecticut State Route 15),
at Interstate #41

Westport
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-39

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ADDED
FOOTNOTES

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Location: Spanning Wilton Road (Connecticut State Route 33) on the Merritt Parkway (Connecticut State Route 15), at Interchange #41, Westport, Fairfield County, Connecticut

UTM: Easting - Zone 18 636300

Northing - 4558000 (1927 North American Datum)

Quad: Norwalk, North Connecticut - New York

Date of Construction: 1938

Designer: George Dunkleberger

Builder: Mariani Construction Company

Present Owner: State of Connecticut Department of Transportation

Present Use: Vehicular traffic. This bridge has no walkways designed for pedestrian use.

Significance: This bridge is one of 25 different style bridges located along a 38-mile stretch of the Merritt Parkway that includes bridges of French, Italian, English or Classic Art Deco styles. These bridges were designed in the 1930s by the innovative bridge designer George Dunkleberger. It is an integral part of the parkway and is therefore eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Researcher: J. Mark Foran
Transportation Planner
Bureau of Planning
Connecticut Department of Transportation
Wethersfield, Connecticut
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Consultant: Dr. Frederic W. Warner
Connecticut Archaeological Survey, Inc.
1615 Stanley Street
New Britain, Connecticut 06050

LOCAL HISTORY

The Merritt Parkway is the product of a philosophical position prevalent in the early part of this century. Architects were busy designing public monuments - libraries, museums, parks. City planners expanded these ideas into the regional concept of parts with roadways running through them. The green belt approach, so much at odds with the congested Post Road (U.S. Route 1) environment, began to be practical in both New York and Connecticut. The parkway was conceived as a bonded State program, using tolls to pay off the bonds.

The introduction of the Model T in 1908 made automobile travel available to millions of Americans and, by the end of World War I, it was apparent that the U.S. highway system was quickly becoming incapable of handling the traffic. Over 15,000,000 Model Ts alone were produced by 1927 and people were beginning to drive for pleasure as much as for business. Between 1915 and 1925, the number of motor vehicles registered in Connecticut rose from 43,985 to 258,985, with no substantial changes in the road (Gombar 1980:3). By 1925, the number of accidents on state highways passed the 21,000 mark, including more than 300 fatalities. The crossing itself is of no particular significance, although Wilton Road, dating back to pre-Revolutionary times, connects the towns of Greens Farms (now Westport) and Wilton. In 1777, two thousand British soldiers, led by General Yrton, traveled this road of their way to burn Danbury.

BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

The need for an improved highway system and the green belt approach to design came together in the person of Warren Creamer, the Highway Department's Chief Engineer of Projects. Working with Highway Commissioner John MacDonald, Creamer urged the construction of a new highway north of the Post Road (Gombar 1980:4-5). Several alternatives had already been considered and rejected, including

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a new truck route south of the Post Road before the plans were finalized. It was Creamer who envisioned a roadway built in harmony with the landscape - divided lanes, limited access built in a wide corridor screened from other development.

In 1923, a Highway Commission study was made for a route connecting New York City with New England, including a major inland route extending from the Westchester Parkways, already under consideration. By 1925, the project had picked up enough support from Governor Trumbull to include it in his recommendations to the Legislature and for several Fairfield County legislators to introduce construction legislation. Although nothing was done by that legislature, the 1927 session did pass two bills authorizing the highway and appropriating \$1,000,000 for design (CHC 1975:3). It was at this stage that difficulties arose with the planning. It was found that no maps of the planned route existed and U.S. Army fliers were called in to make aerial photographs of the route (Bridge Post 10/1/37). In 1931, a commission was appointed by the governor and the first parcels of land were purchased. The project picked up momentum and, in 1933, a bond issued was authorized to pay for the highway and a toll system set up to retire the bonds. The first construction contract was awarded in 1934 and New York announced plans to connect their Hutchinson River Parkway to the Merritt, although it was not officially named that until the following year (CHC 1975:4). The highway was originally designed to take traffic from the New York State border to the Housatonic River where it would rejoin Route 1 at the Washington Bridge. Although the traffic would then be divided between Naugatuck Valley traffic and New Haven traffic, design of a new bridge over the Housatonic and extension of the parkway around New Haven and north to Massachusetts was authorized (Stamford Advocate 10/1/37). The entire 38 miles of the Merritt was opened to the public on Labor Day in 1940. During that weekend, nearly 143,000 cars used the parkway, which cut the driving time from New Haven to New York in half - four hours to two.

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The visual landscape along the highway was a critical part of the overall design. As the highway went through rural Fairfield County, many of the wood roads, logging trails, and footpaths were incorporated into the project as bridle paths and have been used as such since (Connecticut State Highway Commission 1947). Probably the most striking feature of the Merritt, however, is the bridge design. At the time it was built there were 35 overpasses, 25 underpasses, 6 stream bridges, and 3 railroad bridges. All of these were said to have been designed by George Dunkleberger, an architect schooled in the Henry Hobson Richardson tradition. While these bridges are of 20th century contemporary design, they reflect Richardson's concept of civic beautification. Dunkleberger represented the revival of an old American concept of civic responsibility, as he designed these bridges with sensitivity toward civic aesthetics and the environment.

Most of the bridges are of the rigid frame type, and are similar in construction. Because masonry bridges would have added ten to fifteen percent to the bridge costs, Dunkelberger used mostly concrete and iron. It is the surface treatment and ornamentation where most difference are found. In style, the bridges range from Venetian to Art Deco. There are cast iron butterflies on one bridge, Pilgrims and Indians on the another. With each bridge different from the last, they make the 38-mile trip quite interesting but the cost of making each bridge different amounted to less than one percent of the total bridge cost (Summer 1937:501).

The Wilton Road Bridge is an integral part of the Merritt Parkway. Unlike most of the parkway bridges, however, it is a reinforced concrete beam bridge rather than the rigid frame construction found on most Merritt Parkway bridges. This means that the concrete beams rest on two abutments rather than having beams and abutments constructed as an integral whole.

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The bridge was built in 1938 by the Mariana Construction Company, under contract with the Connecticut Highway Department at a cost of \$37,216.97. The bridge is located in a residential area. Route 33 connects Westport and Ridgefield, by way of Wilton.

BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The Wilton Road Bridge carries four lanes of traffic on the Merritt Parkway (State Route 15) over two lanes of traffic on Wilton Road (State Route 33) in the town of Westport, Fairfield County, Connecticut. Like most bridges on the Merritt Parkway, it was designed by Connecticut Highway Department. The bridge is a single span reinforced concrete T Beam bridge with a 54' 10-1/4" centerline clearance between abutments and an overall length of 61' 3". It is constructed on a skew of 30 degrees. The overpass carrying Route 15 consists of two 26' wide roadways, two 5' concrete roadway to bridge rail shoulders, and an 8' center median. The abutments are reinforced concrete, and the bridge rails are open concrete. The west side of the bridge is built on ledge and the east side on rolled gravel.

Like the rest of the Merritt Parkway, the original driving surface was concrete, but has since been paved over with asphalt. By the early 1960s, cracks and spalling began to appear. Rehabilitation of the structure has been conducted periodically since construction.

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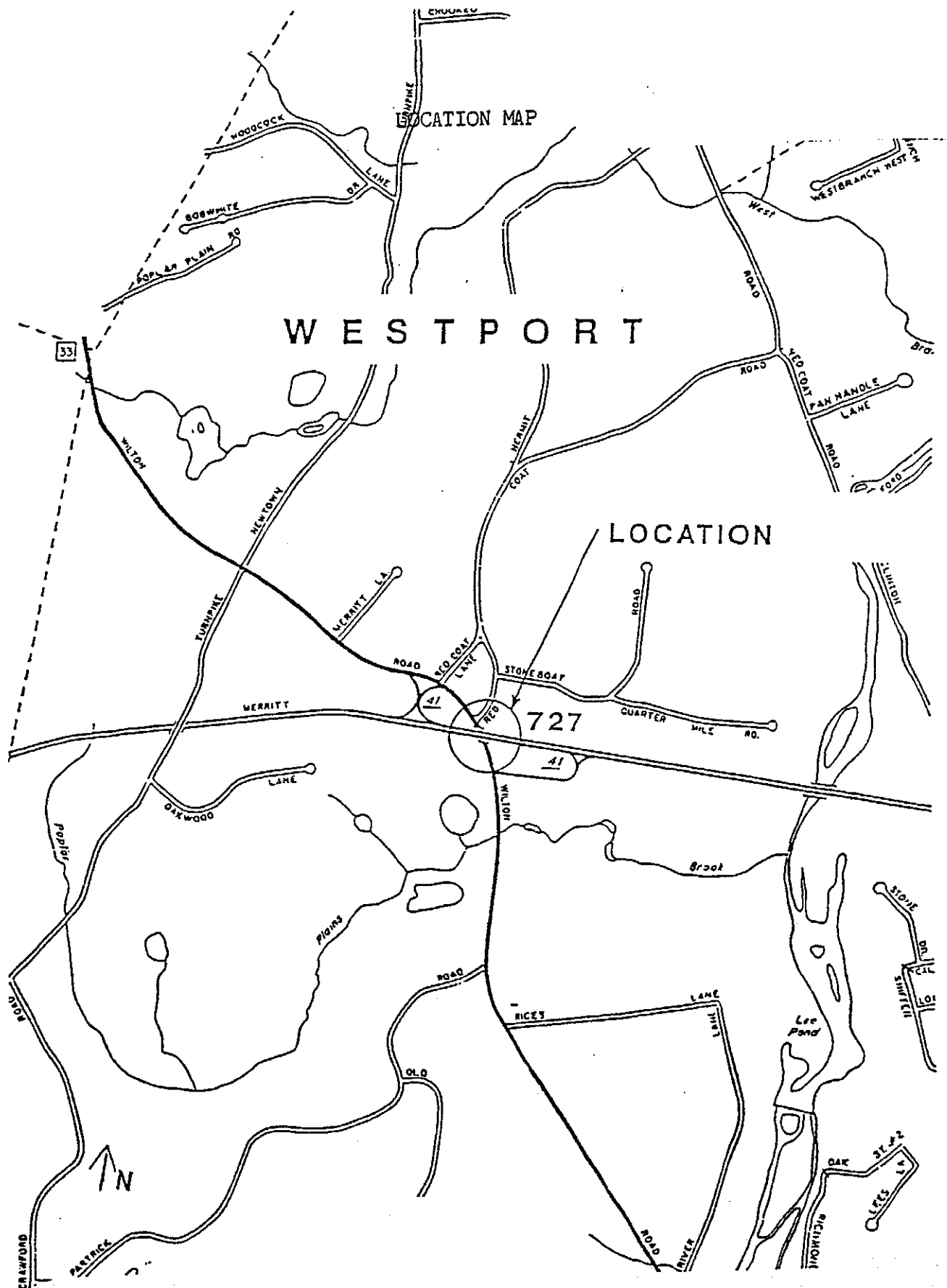
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PROJECT INFORMATION

This document was undertaken in June 1987 in accordance with a memorandum of agreement with a consultant for the Connecticut Department of Transportation as a mitigation measure prior to the replacement of the bridge superstructure.



Addendum to

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